

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

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### What is SARS?

SARS stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. It is an infection caused by a virus. People with SARS have a fever, cough and breathing problems. The disease was first reported among people in Guangdong Province (China), Hanoi (Vietnam), and Hong Kong.

### How is SARS spread?

SARS is spread by close contact between people. Close contact is defined as having cared for, having lived with or having direct contact with the respiratory secretions and/or body fluids of a person with SARS.

Public health experts think that SARS is most likely spread when someone sick with the disease sneezes or coughs droplets into the air and another person breathes in the droplets. People are infectious when they are sick. It is possible that SARS can be also be transmitted more broadly through the air or by touching objects that have become contaminated with the virus that causes SARS.

### What are the symptoms of SARS?

In general, SARS begins with a fever greater than 100.4°F [ $>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$ ]. Other early symptoms may include headache, an overall feeling of discomfort, body aches, or mild respiratory symptoms (coughing, sneezing, or shortness of breath). After 2 to 7 days, symptoms may worsen significantly. Some SARS patients may develop a severe dry cough and have trouble breathing.

### Who is at risk for SARS?

- People who have recently traveled to a country where community spread of SARS has been documented.
- People who have had direct close contact with a person who is sick with SARS. For example: people living with a SARS patient; or health care workers who did not wear a mask while taking care of a SARS patient. In the United States, there is no indication that SARS is being spread at this time. Public health officials continue to monitor this situation very closely.

### What you should do to protect yourself?

- Avoid close contact with people who have returned within 10 days from a high-risk area, but **only if they are currently ill with symptoms consistent with SARS infection**. (There is no need to avoid recent travelers who have no symptoms of SARS.)
- Avoid close contact with a person who may have SARS by wearing a mask. Or, the infected person can wear a mask as this can reduce the number of droplets coughed into the air.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water—this can help prevent the spread of SARS and many other viruses and bacteria. Alcohol hand gels and rubs may also be used to wash and decontaminate the hands.
- Do not share food, drinks, or eating utensils with other people, especially if they are ill. This measure is important for preventing the spread of SARS and other germs.

## **Should you avoid contact with co-workers or classmates who traveled recently?**

**At this point there is no evidence that a person without symptoms may transmit SARS to other people and it is very unlikely to be possible.** Persons *without symptoms* who have traveled to high-risk areas do not need to be isolated or quarantined. Respiratory symptoms in a person *without a recent history of travel to a high-risk area or close contact with a SARS patient* are most likely caused by other common respiratory illnesses. Respiratory illness is very common, so most respiratory illness, even in people returning from parts of the world with SARS risk, will not be SARS.

## **If someone is exposed to SARS, how long could it take them to become sick?**

The incubation period for SARS is typically 2 to 7 days. (The “incubation period” means the time it takes for symptoms to begin after being exposed to a disease-causing germ.)

Because isolated reports have suggested the SARS incubation period could be as long as 10 days, anyone who has traveled to a high-risk area should monitor themselves for signs of illness (fever greater than 100.4°F [ $>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$ ] and one or more respiratory symptoms) for ten days upon return.

**If you think you or someone in your family might have SARS (because of fever, with cough and trouble breathing and with an exposure to a ill person with symptoms consistent with SARS), you should consult a doctor as soon as possible.** The ill person should cover his or her mouth and nose with tissues when coughing or sneezing, and avoid close contact with other people.

## **Where can I get more information?**

- Visit the SARS website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/)
- Visit the World Health Organization website at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)
- Call the CDC hotline at: (888) 246-2675 English — (888) 246-2857 Español — (866) 874-2646 TTY
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>

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